

Mech 2311

Chapter 2311: Monster Slayer

The source of the disaster had succumbed!

In the middle of the nutrient processing plant, a shrine of the Hallowed Abyss Temple rested on a large platform.

The dark fog that burst out of the shrine receded bit by bit. Soon enough, the shrine produced no more darkness, giving everyone the hope that the anomaly that had engulfed Ulimo Citadel and its surroundings no longer threatened the Larkinsons, pirates and everyone trapped inside its dark embrace.

Ketis, who had managed to defeat a mutated monstrosity that was powerful enough to rampage through several infantry companies, had become absolutely drained.

Wary of the large hole in the floor that led straight down into one of the dangerous vats of the plant, she summoned up the last of her strength to drag her body a healthy distance away.

Eventually, her overstrained muscles could no longer keep her upright. She fell onto her butt and became dazed.

The successive battles took everything she had to achieve victory. She fought her way to the core section of the marketplace, barely managed to turn the insane leader of the Dry Snakes himself and fought on a knife's edge when she confronted the transformed Grey Watcher!

The last battle especially pushed her to her limits!

Even though she was a mech designer, and a pretty good one for her age at that, she was also a Swordmaiden.

It didn't matter that she was supposed to dedicate herself to an intellectual pursuit. She lived her life around swordsmanship, and it made no sense for her to specialize in designing sword-wielding mechs if she didn't possess the proficiency to handle them with as much skill as the mech pilots who were supposed to depend on her products!

Her greatest desire was to design the best and most suited swordsman mechs for her fellow Swordmaidens. This was why she diligently tried to pursue greater swordsmanship and mech design at the same time.

The burden on her shoulders was huge. The two disciplines demanded two completely different skill sets. Having learned the value of time from Ves, Ketis knew that she had to make many sacrifices in order to pursue her chosen path to the fullest.

This was why she decided to specialize in designing mechs that primarily fought by wielding swords. Other mechs simply didn't interest her. She felt no passion at the prospect of designing a rifleman mech or even a lancer mech.

Though there were many kinds of mechs that each possessed their own charm, she didn't love every mech equally like Ves.

While her current mentor possessed a broader love and curiosity for mechs that constantly urged him to design different mechs, Ketis lacked this common impulse.

What she loved wasn't mechs. What she truly loved was making the Swordmaidens stronger.

In fact, her desires and ambitions centered so much around the Swordmaidens that she wouldn't know what to do if they no longer existed! It was very likely that she would suffer a complete mental collapse if every Swordmaiden died.

Her survival wasn't important compared to the survival of her fellow sisters! As long as one qualified Swordmaiden remained alive to carry the torch, Ketis would gladly sacrifice her life to further this cause!

This was why she unreservedly chose to confront the source of the anomaly. Mech designer or not, the dark ritual of the Hallowed Abyss Temple threatened the entirety of the Swordmaidens! How could she stand by and watch her sisters get swallowed by this artificial abyss?

Fortunately, she succeeded.

Her extreme desire to save the Swordmaidens helped her draw out all of her fighting potential. Though the mutated Grey Watcher clearly lacked hand-to-hand combat training, his clumsy moves possessed so much lethality that a single glancing blow from his claws would have shredded her unarmored body!

Armed with just a single cutlass, it took every bit of training and pushing her body to the extreme to evade the monster's powerful attacks while retaliating everytime she spotted a good opening. If not for taking advantage of the maddened monster's lack of situational awareness, who knew how the battle might have ended.

Ketis knew very well how frail her scheme truly was! While she could have lasted longer and lower her chances of getting hit if she focused purely on evasion, that was not how a Swordmaiden fought!

Swords were made to be used!

Besides, the constant attacks and the wounds she dealt were very crucial despite the fact that the mutated monster regenerated himself almost instantly.

She noticed that the Grey Watcher wasn't used to the rigors of combat. A real warrior would have endured the pain and kept his cool, but Grey Watcher Xarnus kept growing angrier and angrier with every painful wound he suffered!

Whether the Grey Watcher was too inexperienced to manage his pain response or whether his altered physiology decreased his capacity for rational thought, the monster had turned almost rabid at the very end. The monstrosity became so fixated at the thought of killing the source of his pain that he had almost completely tunnel visioned on her, which was a deadly mistake in combat!

To Ketis, the transformed monster's defeat served as a very poignant lesson to her. "Power without control is wasted power."

As she ran her mind back through the battle, she began to feel unprecedentedly inspired.

The lopsided battle between her and the transformed cultist melded with her desire to design mechs to produce a preliminary mech concept that came straight from her heart!

Immense satisfaction suffused her entire mind as she imagined a mech that embodied all of the principles she used to defeat her opponent.

She wanted to design a supreme swordsman mech that excelled at dueling stronger or better opponents.

She wanted to enact her philosophy of combining power with precise control in a swordsman mech that possessed great potential as long as its mech pilot was skilled enough to make use of its strengths.

She already had a name in mind for this immature but promising mech design.

"Monster Slayer."

Minutes passed as Ketis became immersed in her ideas. Despite the blood, debris and body parts spread across the hall of the shrine, she calmly recovered from her exertion while fleshing out the Monster Slayer design in her mind.

The mech not only had to match her performance against the mutated Grey Watcher, it had to do even better!

Its sword had to be even better than the cutlass she wielded!

"I need to pair it with the best greatsword that I can design!"

This was the only way she could channel her frustration at resorting to trickery to defeat her formidable foe.

The manner in which she defeated the Grey Watcher left her without any way to obtain a trophy from his corpse.

"Maybe I should grab some freshly-produced nutrient packs on the way out. Ves will love them." She muttered.

After another minute of rest, she picked herself up from the ground and approached the decapitated corpse of Grand Protector Roshaw.

With the death of the pirate lord of Ulimo Citadel, the rest of the defenders were no longer much of a concern. The Larkinson Clan could easily defeat the remnants of the pirates as long as the anomaly receded.

Though the darkness still lingered, it already started to weaken. It wouldn't take long for the dark fog to dissipate.

In the meantime, Ketis harvested her trophies.

She filched the pirate lord's hand cannon for her own. Though its security system locked her out of using the weapon, she wasn't really interested in using it. She just wanted to display the formidable weapon in a trophy case.

After searching the deceased Grand Protector's corpse, she managed to obtain something even better. After removing the man's gauntlets, she pulled out an ornate ring from a finger.

The ring was shaped like a snake in the process of molting. Ketis appreciated its multi-layered design and took a fancy of using it to represent her contribution in the Battle of Ulimo Citadel.

Not quite satisfied with her gains, she looked around and approached the toppled statue of the so-called Unending One.

"Meow."

Lucky had climbed back up to the hole he fled into earlier. He still bore a lot of damage and needed a lot of time to recover. The cat padded over to Ketis and nuzzled his nose against her leg.

"Meoww..."

She gently brushed his back, taking care not to hit the damaged portions of his body.

"Well that was a big fight, wasn't it? I'm amazed you managed to chew through the underside of the statue!"

Lucky hadn't actually eaten through all of the material. He only swallowed a portion of what he managed to bite with his exceptional teeth. A large amount of bite-sized chunks of old metals were strewn across the base of the statue.

Even so, Lucky ingested more than enough metal to develop some indigestion! This was the other reason why he came across as tired. He ate way too many dense metals in a very short amount of time.

Though his stomach capacity was so abnormally large that it must be some dimensional pocket of sorts, even it had limits!

Ketis grabbed one of the chunks that Lucky had bitten off and discarded and decided to take it as another trophy.

Together with the damaged energised scimitar from Captain Wenter of the Hydra Battalion, she gained at least four new trophies to show off to her fellow sisters!

"It's too bad there's no one else left alive." She sighed.

Just as she thought that the outcome of the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, the floor suddenly shook! Immediately afterwards, the darkness that cloyed around her suddenly intensified!

"What!?" Ketis urgently lifted herself to her feet while holding her cutlass. "It's not over yet?!"

The darkness seemed to have come alive, and much of it started to flow out of the shrine. Just to be sure, Ketis turned around and studied the toppled statue and the ruined ritual circle underneath.

Both of them were inert! Neither of them should have any power left, so why did she feel more and more pressure from above?

"Something must be happening in space!" She quickly concluded.

"Meow!"

Both woman and cat looked at the ceiling, trying to imagine what kind of development had occurred that caused them to feel so much threat.

Ketis grew more and more nervous as she felt some primordial part of her brain shiver in terror at something many kilometers away.

The threat that had emerged must be particularly powerful for her to feel so terrified from a great distance!

Outside into space, the grey ghost mechs that continually assaulted the Larkinsons trapped inside the anomaly had only grown more and more threatening.

Ever since the ghosts merged together to form supermechs, the pressure onto the Larkinson mechs increased!

Their insane durability combined with their abnormally strong offensive power rendered them deathly against any regular third-class mech!

Not even the Bright Warrior mechs were able to last against the giant abomination mechs! Their Breyer alloy visibly crunched when struck by one of the many limbs of the giant grey mechs!

The only mech that could possibly inflict meaningful damage to it was Joshua's Quint. Every other Larkinson mech was forced to play a supporting role in order to give as much space as possible for the expert candidate to play to his strengths.

Slowly but surely, the Larkinsons managed to stem their losses and contain their great threat.

Yet just when they all thought that they had the situation under control, the darkness abruptly intensified all of a sudden!

An unexpected adverse development took place. The dark fog seemingly grew exponentially stronger while at the same time becoming less stable! Much of the order it previously exhibited was gone.

Ves winced and held his head as his heightened spiritual sensitivity couldn't take the sheer influx of confusing stimuli.

"Something is happening! The darkness is trying to get inside!"

Chapter 2312: The Unending One

The huge grey abomination that bore several piercing wounds after getting struck by the Quint suddenly froze.

The dark fog rapidly grew more intense and hammered the protective field that Jannzi Larkinson and her Shield of Samar strenuously kept up. Her mind and will couldn't take it any longer!

"I can't hold! I'm sorry!" She shrieked with anguish!

Her amazing field that kept the darkness at bay finally shattered under the pressure! Instead of engulfing everyone in isolating cages that kept them apart from each other,

the darkness that managed to overwhelm the barrier all flowed into the grey abomination mech that had frozen in space.

Its dimensions started to swell as a huge influx of darkness poured into its almost-solid body. The shape of the abomination blurred as it slowly began to lose some of the traits that made it look like a messy amalgamation of mechs.

Almost every bit of darkness in their surroundings poured into abomination, thereby weakening the isolation effect of the anomaly to a significant degree.

Suddenly, a lot more space opened up. Portions of Ulimo Citadel, the surrounding asteroids and amazingly the Penitent Sisters became visible again!

It turned out that the anomaly exerted a lot of strength in trying to take down the Hexer exiles. Ves quickly spotted at least two-hundred downed mechs as they had just confronted another giant ghostly abomination!

Right now, that huge grey abomination began to blur and move towards the one that was absorbing all of the darkness. The two soon began to merge, producing a powerful entity whose shape became more and more defined!

The pressure exuded by the grey abomination abruptly increased, suppressing almost every Larkinson and Penitent Sister in the anomalous region!

Ves felt as if a great threat had emerged, one that was so powerful that it began to influence him and some of the spiritual objects around him in an adverse way!

The Unstable Chaos Essence gem that Ves carried in his pocket began to glow without his notice.

The Ancient Sarcophagus became a bit less capable of containing its tyrannically strong prisoner.

Both of them reacted in a mysterious manner against the towering entity that was slowly taking shape in front the surviving combatants of the Larkinson Clan!

"Is that... a whale with tentacles?"

A god had emerged from the abyss! Extreme bestial fury radiated from the aquatic-looking grey monster as its tentacles angrily whipped through empty space, leaving strange afterimages after their passing!

A powerful spiritual roar emanated from this living terror of the Nyxian Gap! The power exuded by the grey whale was immense!

As every other Larkinson tried to suppress their fears and ready themselves for one more battle, Ves tried to figure out what the hell the huge influx of darkness had spawned.

"Is this the final counterattack of the Hallowed Abyss Temple?"

The grey manifestation differed from the grey ghost mechs and grey abomination mechs in one very important aspect.

Whereas the former apparitions came across as mindless automatons driven by basic instructions, this huge tentacled whale felt alive!

Yes, alive!

Up until now, Ves only sensed death from the dark sphere. The anomaly's capacity to generate combat-capable ghosts from mechs that had fallen into the past was clearly a result of messing with death.

Even the huge and powerful abomination mechs didn't carry any life despite their ludicrously-strong combat capabilities. They were merely composites of multiple ghost mechs.

However, this time was different!

After absorbing all of the grey ghosts and abomination within the weakening dark sphere, the entity that had emerged from it all exuded a very different spiritual signature than before!

It was alive, and not just a little bit! This was no newborn spiritual abomination who was just trying to get a grip on its powers.

This was a mature spiritual entity! In fact, the sheer age it exuded made it clear that it had lived since antiquity. Before humans invented anything more complicated than fire, this aquatic-looking exobeast was already in existence!

Ves suddenly realized that the huge tentacled whale that grew to the size of a light carrier was actually an avatar!

If he tried his best to see through the sheer blinding might of this forming entity, he could sense that some of the strength pouring into it came from the imaginary realm.

Through some unknown means, this ancient entity managed to extend its influence across the Nyxian Gap and forcefully occupy a grey vessel as an additional body!

It must be similar to how his mother Cynthia managed to transform the Superior Mother into an extension of herself.

However, compared to the subtlety of her technique, this living alien relic relied on overwhelming might and strange alien methods to extend its presence. It was both fascinating and horrifying to Ves.

The transformation taking place had opened his eyes, yet the downside was that the price for this lesson might very well be his life and the life of every Larkinson trapped inside this anomaly!

James looked incredibly solemn as he stood by his side in the bridge of the Scarlet Rose.

"The Unending One has arrived. His rage is boundless. He desires to crush us for affronting his dreadful majesty."

"What? The Unending One?" Ves turned to the Living Prophet. "Is this monster tied to the Hallowed Abyss Temple?"

James nodded. "The Unending One is a god, make no mistake. It seems that the Mirror Raiders inside the citadel has succeeded in interrupting the ritual. The earlier outburst of darkness must have been a result of stopping it. Yet ending the ritual doesn't mean the darkness that has already been generated has disappeared."

The anomaly weakened, but that was because the avatar of the Unending One absorbed most of its power!

Once the grey tentacled whale completed his formation, it released a second roar before launching an attack!

Several dark tentacles placed around his body abruptly extended to some of the closest mechs. The Unending One quickly grabbed a handful of Avatar, Sentinel and Vandal mechs before pulling them back.

"Ahhh! I can't get loose!"

"Help!"

"Maintain your distance!" Major Verle ordered over the command net. "Ranged mechs, fire at this monster! Don't conserve your energy or ammunition. Take down this beast as fast as possible!"

Unfortunately for the Larkinsons, most of the lasers and projectiles simply bounced off the thick grey surface of the monstrously-huge whale. The Unending One's frightening tentacles casually whipped some of the incoming firepower away without showing any signs of damage.

Once the beast brought back the mechs, the cruel and bloodthirsty beast cruelly opened his enormous maw in order to engulf the mechs!

A huge void closed with an enormous snap as the unlucky Larkinson mech pilots were crushed along with their mechs!

The mech pilots didn't even have the chance to eject from their machines as the tentacles tightly wrapped their torsos. It was as if the Unending One delighted in killing humans!

Ves' face grew ugly. How could they possibly fight against this grey avatar? Its might was overwhelming. If he had a couple of warships armed with cruiser-grade weapons, he might have stood a chance of damaging it, but all he had was several hundred exhausted and depleted mechs!

The mechs that Ves brought into the anomaly had all fought through many horrors. As for the mechs that managed to survive from the beginning of the Battle of Ulimo Citadel, their depletion was much more severe!

The Swordmaiden mechs that had fought so effectively against the grey ghosts barely retained enough energy to swing their Breyer alloy greatswords.

Many of the Bright Warrior mechs that served as the mainstay of the Avatars of Myth were also running on fumes.

As an emergency measure, a shuttle quickly emerged from the Scarlet Rose and approached the Quint. A number of mech technicians in hazard suits emerged from the vehicle and quickly began to open up the mech to replace some of the depleted energy cells.

So far, the Quint exhibited the greatest battle effectiveness against the grey spiritual apparitions. If the Unending One's avatar operated along the same principles, then Joshua's designated mech should be their only solution against this powerful threat!

"The monster is approaching! Watch out!"

Not content with fishing for mechs with some of his tentacles, the powerful horror flew forward. Just as the Unending One's tentacles began to reach out to capture more Larkinson mechs, a thunderous volley of positron beams, gauss rounds and missiles impacted the grey whale's flank!

The surviving Penitent Sister mechs were coming to their aid!

"Assault this beast!" Commander Valerie Chancy ordered. "Do not rest until this evil beast is slain!"

Though the Penitent Sisters endured the same difficulties as the Larkinson mechs, their greater strength allowed them to retain much more battle effectiveness.

The only reason why they suffered at all was because they didn't have any expert candidates to break their shadowy cages. The absence of a masterwork mech such as the Quint also left them unable to defeat the abomination mechs that emerged later.

Despite their powerful weapons, the Penitent Sisters lost hundreds of machines as the abomination mechs ruthlessly crushed them without encountering any serious threat.

The results this time were not much different. Despite the enormous firepower their ranged mechs unleashed, the the Unending One only briefly paused before he resumed his angry flight towards the main concentration of Larkinsons!

In desperation, the melee mechs of the Penitent Sisters closed in and attempted to attack the tentacles surrounding the alien whale's body.

Nothing happened! Every sword strike and every spear stab bounced off the surprisingly-solid tentacles.

The Unending One became angry at these attacks! His tentacles grasped the Penitent Sister mechs and squeezed. The forces exerted by the tentacles were so strong that the advanced second-class armor systems of the trapped mechs only briefly held before succumbing!

More than a dozen melee mechs were crushed in half, with many of their former Hexer mech pilots dying on the spot!

"How can we possibly stop this menace?!"

"The beast is heading straight for the Scarlet Rose!"

The ship had already turned on her axis in order to distance herself from the avatar. Unfortunately, the angry god was determined to chase after the ship.

"The Unending One wishes to vent his fury on you." James spoke and frowned. "There is another reason why he wants to chase after you. There is something about you that is attracting him. I'm having difficulty determining why. The mechs around us are mere annoyances to this dark god."

Whatever the case, the unarmed Scarlet Rose was no match against this grey whale that was significantly larger than the mobile supply frigate!

"Joshua!"

After replenishing some of its spent energy cells, the Quint had gained a second wind. In its current lancer mech configuration, the Quint charged forth and attempted to drive its lance deep into the monstrous entity's flank!

Just as everyone put their hopes on Joshua, the Quint managed to drive its lance against the grey whale's skin, only to break an instant later!

The Unending One was too strong! The Quint sustained substantial damage as its charge caused it to crash and bounce away from the beast's slightly-flexible surface.

"Noo!"

The only mech that had shown the ability to harm the stronger grey apparitions had failed to inflict a single meaningful wound against this powerful beast.

"Damnit, what will it take to stop this monster?!"

"Is this the terror of the Nyxian Gap?"

"Keep fighting! Maybe it's only faking! Fire everything!"

The Bright Warriors launched their missiles from their miniature shoulder launchers in desperation. The Avatar mech pilots always saved up these surprisingly compact missiles as a last resort when they encountered strong second-class mechs.

Now, there was no longer any meaning for holding them back. Hundreds of small missiles detonated with enough destruction to wipe out a second-class mech company, yet as the smoke dissipated, the grey alien whale's momentum hadn't stopped!

The Unending One moved quickly. His tentacles slapped aside any mech in his way as if they were toys. Just as the grey whale opened his wide maw in order to engulf the entire hull of the Scarlet Rose, one single Larkinson rose up to save the ship!

A huge burst of willpower-infused energy formed into a glowing barrier that interrupted the enormous grey whale's attack!

Even though the barrier shattered immediately afterwards, the Unending One wailed in silent pain as some of its teeth had shattered!

A single mech that began to output a greater and greater amount of strength flew between the ship and the dark god's avatar.

"The Shield of Samar!"

The mech appeared much different than before. Ves widened his eyes as the mech began to glow brighter and brighter as Jannzi's intense desire to protect her fellow clanmates had surpassed a critical point!

"She's.. She's breaking through!"

The resonance meters of the Scarlet Rose began to chirp as they detected more and more resonance strength from the Shield of Samar.

Jannzi Larkinson was undergoing apotheosis! She was taking her first true step towards godhood!

"I AM THE SHIELD OF MY CLAN!"

The projection of an immense exobeast began to form behind her mech! A very different but uplifting roar emanated from this newly-emerged entity!

Chapter 2313: Roar!

Every expert candidate needed to find out the reasons why they fought.

No expert pilot exhibited any uncertainty about their purpose because each of them had gone through this crucial cycle.

Without a reason to fight and without an ideal to uphold, why should they wield the extraordinary power that came with becoming a demigod?

Every expert pilot stood for something!

Every expert pilot excelled at something!

Every expert pilot was willing to die for something!

Until every expert candidate resolved their doubts and inner struggles in order to define these qualities, their half-formed force of will would never achieve the purity required to trigger a breakthrough.

These challenges had stopped every expert candidate in the Larkinson Clan from transitioning into actual expert pilots.

In fact, their conditions weren't unusual. There were plenty of expert candidates who enjoyed much better conditions who never gained this life-changing opportunity.

No matter how much advice they received, not even other high-ranking mech pilots could help these candidates shape their own wills.

This was because they ultimately had to solve their doubts by themselves. If expert candidates let others think on their behalf, then they lacked the will to fight on their own. Such weak mech pilots would never be able to channel the force of will of an actual expert pilot.

It didn't matter what kind of principles or ideals an expert pilot eventually adopted. Good or evil, broad or narrow, personal or aspirational, as long as they made their choices and dedicated their entire wills to them, they became worthy to transcend into a higher state of life!

In this important junction where the avatar of the terrifying spiritual entity known as the Unending One threatened Ves and every Larkinson that Jannzi cared about, she resolved her last remaining doubt.

The issue she struggled with was one related to morality. As a space knight specialist who tried to embody the knightly ideals, Jannzi's ideals weren't completely compatible with the interests of the clan.

The Larkinson Clan may present itself as honorable, but in practice it still took after its founder and leader in some aspects.

In addition, the clan also didn't pursue a noble mission, unlike the Larkinson Family.

In the past, Jannzi was proud to be a Larkinson. Their family rightfully earned a lot of honor due to the selfless sacrifices of its mech pilots. The Larkinson Family had always fought for the Bright Republic! That was one of the core pillars of its identity!

The clan lacked this purpose, and that showed. The Larkinsons, unmoored by any notions of serving a state, began to look after their own interests. Starting from Ves, the clansmen began to adopt a considerably more selfish mindset.

Sometimes, they worked to better the entire clan. Other times, they only wanted to channel more benefits to their own clique or faction.

What was even more egregious to Jannzi was when her clansmen exhibited pure selfishness and solely sought to strengthen themselves even if it came at the detriment of other clansmen!

How could Jannzi feel proud of herself for standing up for these bastards who didn't deserve her protection?

It was not easy to be someone's shield!

Space knights had to sacrifice much to dedicate themselves to their roles. Their mechs may be armed with swords or other weapons, but their offensive power was dreadfully

weak. Their machines moved slower than any other mech and their main strength did nothing to solve their lack of agency in battles.

When it came down to it, knight mechs mostly served as movable cover. The truth about instilling knightly ideals to mech pilots who specialized in piloting defensive mechs was just to indoctrinate them into accepting their role.

Knight mech specialists like Jannzi not only had to pilot mechs that mainly spent their time in battles by absorbing hits, they also had to like it! Without a lot of patience and tolerance, knight mech pilots wouldn't be able to accept their role in earnest.

This was also what she struggled with. It was one thing to be patient and tolerant if her efforts benefited the people who lived in a state. It was another thing to do the same when she solely fought for some self-serving clansmen!

Of course, not everyone in the Larkinson Clan was bad. Whether they were trueblood or adopted, she developed a favorable impression of many fellow clansmen.

Each of them adopted the Larkinson ideals and fought for their new comrades. The Avatars of Myth developed a strong brotherhood culture where every Avatar mech pilot watched out for each other.

She always felt warmth in her heart when she was with her fellow Avatars.

However, that did not mean she was eager to protect the more self-serving members of the clan. Chief among them was Ves. She spent enough time around him to know that while he had offered a lot of opportunities for the clan, he mainly sought to cultivate his own army.

Was she willing to dedicate herself to serve this selfish cause?

Was she willing to condone the more questionable decisions of Ves and the clan?

A leader who truly cared about his people would never choose to go on an excursion into the Nyxian Gap. The dangers were unimaginable here and every gain came at the cost of human lives.

This entire trip was an exercise in selfishness as far as she was concerned!

The main reason why she agreed to join the task force was because she worried about her fellow Larkinsons.

Now, in this incredibly dangerous moment where an overpowering whale monster threatened to kill off most if not all of the Larkinsons in the Nyxian Gap, she had finally discovered a truth about herself.

She loved her fellow Larkinsons! She wanted to protect them and shield them against the threats they weren't capable of facing by themselves.

Every Larkinson was kin to her. No matter their origins or motivations, once they called themselves a Larkinson, they were part of her family as far as she was concerned!

With the powerful grey monster crushing mechs with ease and moving to engulf the Scarlet Rose, Jannzi didn't care about whether her fellow Larkinsons deserved her protection.

It didn't matter. Whether they were worthy or not, whether she liked them or not, whether she supported their cause or not, family was family.

Just like in the Larkinson Family in the past, Jannzi would never forgive herself if she stood by and let the Larkinsons face a threat by themselves.

After resolving these final doubts in the midst of a crisis that had forced her to confront this issue, she had overcome the final remaining hurdle that held her back from transforming her force of will!

Now that her conviction grew was no longer burdened by doubts, her mind and will merged to a greater degree, encountering too little resistance to stop the immensely important process known to the mech community as apotheosis.

The transformation from mortal to divine was one of the most magical processes that people could experience.

Jannzi felt as if her will grew exponentially more powerful, breaking past the confines of her mind and expanding into the rest of her mech and beyond!

"I dedicate myself to protect my fellow Larkinsons! No matter how much we change, no matter what path we take, as long as they are my family, I shall carry my shield and put myself in the path of any enemy who wishes us ill! This is my creed!"

As soon as she announced those words, she gained an even greater burst of strength!

For the second time in her life, she was able to resonate with her own mech. That was very much apparent from how her Shield of Samar began to glow in a very characteristic manner!

Unlike her previous breakthrough, this was not a sign of forced resonance. Her promotion to a higher rank did not lend her strength that she was not able to retain at the end.

This time, her heavily-customized Aurora Titan mech glowed with the warmth and stability of true resonance!

As long as she survived this battle and settled down, she would be able to evoke this kind of resonance at will whenever she piloted a mech!

Of course, she needed to learn how to channel this new power, and it was very important that her mech was built to resonate as much as possible with her unique resonance signature.

However, as her first resonance-empowered barrier broke from a single collision against the giant tentacled whale, Jannzi knew that her newfound level of strength was not enough to resist this horrifyingly powerful enemy!

There was only one other source of strength that she could draw upon.

Her mech.

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She invested more and more of her will into her Shield of Samar, causing it to resonate with her to an even greater degree than before!

Even though the customized super-medium space knight wasn't designed with resonance in mind, Jannzi bonded so much with the Shield of Samar that the life it contained responded in kind!

Through their combined efforts, they managed to break some of the suppression on the mech. A window opened up where a very familiar design spirit finally gained an entry into the anomaly that surrounded Ulimo Citadel!

Another burst of strength flowed through Jannzi's mind and will as she and her mech regained their connections to Qilanxo.

Noticing the incredibly powerful dark god arrayed against the Larkinsons, Qilanxo did not spare anything as she donated additional power to Jannzi and her mech.

Another phenomenon took shape with the help of Jannzi's fantastic intimacy towards her personal mech.

The Shield of Samar was her closest partner in battle! Qilanxo suddenly amplified the exceptional resonance the pair achieved, thereby achieving the very rare condition of complete resonance!

"Unity of Man and Machine!" Ves gasped!

Every other Larkinson and Penitent Sister watched with amazement as a large energy projection that matched the size of the evil grey creature began to form behind the glowing Shield of Samar.

Enough of them recognized what a legendary moment they were witnessing. Every instance where the Unity of Man and Machine dawned upon the battlefield were unforgettably important moments in the history of mechs.

No one wanted to blink for fear of missing even a single instance of this unique and life-changing event!

The glowing golden manifestation in the shape of a giant reptilian exobeast came to life and roared in challenge at the avatar of the dark god!

Though the dark god looked surprised, his fury at the Larkinsons drove him to roar a challenge of his own!

As one of the spiritual overlords of the Nyxian Gap, the Unending One was not about to back down in front of this intruder!

"QILANXO!" Jannzi roared as her glowing eyes overflowed with resonance. "HELP ME SAVE MY FAMILY!"

With her will completely aligned with the energy projection, Qilanxo acted accordingly and moved to charge into the avatar of the dark god!

The two titanic creatures collided with each other and began to brawl against each other!

They unleashed immense forces against each other as the dark god's tentacles rained hundreds of painful blows against the sacred god's body.

In turn, Qilanxo bit and clawed at the tentacles, breaking them and ripping them apart at a steady pace!

Seeing that he was losing more and more tentacles, the Unending One's fury peaked! He opened his maw, which began to accumulate most of the energy in his avatar.

"The grey beast is charging some sort of super attack!"

The pressure emanating from the depths of the Unending One's maw was horrible! Everyone instinctively felt that nothing could survive if the dark god was allowed to unleash his attack!

Qilanxo immediately became aware of the threat and stopped her attempts to tear the hardy avatar apart in order to form the most powerful barrier that she could muster!

The Unending One did not take long to charge his ultimate attack. Accompanied by a silent but powerful roar that shook the entire dark sphere, a beam of pure concentrated darkness shot out from his gaping maw!

The beam collided against the glowing barrier that Qilanxo erected!

Far from incurring any damage, the barrier remained absolutely stable even as the immense energies of the dark beam attack continued to pour in the direction of Qilanxo and the Larkinsons she shielded!

The Unending One eventually exhausted his ultimate attack. His avatar grew opaque and less substantial as it no longer held the energy to maintain its existence.

The dark god's monstrous eyes looked perplexed as his incredibly powerful attack failed to achieve the outcome he expected.

Qilanxo managed to block the powerful attack! To be more precise, the space barrier she erected had siphoned the entire dark beam into a very different region of space!

Though this extremely potent barrier took a lot of out her energy projection, the sacred god possessed enough strength to charge forth in order to chomp the weakened avatar!!

A large spiritual explosion occurred as the Unending One's form completely shattered!

The anomaly finally receded and the light of Jannzi's resonance finally drove the darkness away.

The Larkinson Clan had won against the eldritch entity!

"JAANNNZIIII!" Someone roared in the open channel.

Victorious and exulting cries flooded the communication channels as the energy projection of the sacred god finally faded away.

The explosive Battle of Ulimo Citadel had finally come to an end!

Chapter 2314: Bitter

The Larkinson Clan finally achieved victory!

After disabling as many superweapons as possible, forcing thousands of pirate mechs to retreat and overcoming an artificially-induced anomaly with all of the horrors that followed, the attackers finally won the long and exhausting day.

Certainly, around 3000 pirate mechs had retreated into the secure mech hangars at Ulimo. The mechs of the Dry Snakes, Xona Stalkers, Farmund's Own, Hapid Qlinters and the Ulimo Militia successfully rode the artificial anomaly out in their protective hideouts.

Yet compared to an inexplicably powerful god-like apparition, these paltry pirate mechs seemed completely inconsequential to the Larkinson Clan.

They aimed to wipe out the remainder of the pirate mech forces with as little losses as possible. Speed was of the essence.

"Don't let these pirates group up again!"

Reacting quickly, Major Verle ordered the hundreds of Penitent Sister mechs to storm the mech hangars and wipe out everything inside before the pirate mechs had time to emerge back into space.

Stuck in their hangars, the third-class mechs of the various pirate groups were not only highly concentrated, but also boxed in by their environment! The ranged Hexer mechs of the Penitent Sisters easily slew them without incurring any meaningful damage!

Of course, there weren't enough Penitent Sister mechs to cover every mech hangar, but the surviving pirate combatants experienced several hindrances due to several reasons.

First, the pirates lacked critical direction at the top. The unexplained absence of Grand Protector Roshaw took out a critical authority who possessed a complete overview of every pirate asset. Due to the strict hierarchical structure of the pirate command authority, none of the surviving pirate commanders possessed enough authority to issue orders to everyone.

What was particularly detrimental to the pirates was that the missing pirate lord closely grasped every secret and trump card at Ulimo Citadel! Due to a perennial lack of trust, the Grand Protector never shared many of these secrets to his subordinates. Now that he was gone, every secret measure that hadn't fallen victim yet to the Larkinson Clan remained completely unused because no one learned of their existence!

Of course, with sufficient communication, the pirates might be able to overcome these issues in time.

It was too bad that their enemies did not intend to give the remaining pirates the time to reorganize their ranks!

"The Grand Protector is dead and every major threat to the Larkinson Clan is taken care of. This is our best opportunity to redeem ourselves!"

Even if the pirates were still capable of fielding 3000 mechs, now that they were dispersed and stowed in many different mech hangars strewn across Ulimo, it became critical to stop them from consolidating together.

Though the Xona Stalker defectors that accompanied Ketis and Lucky to the shrine had perished, there were many hundreds more compatriots spread throughout the core sections of the pirate stronghold! Stationed in critical positions, they surreptitiously or overtly sabotaged many critical power or communication nodes!

With many mech hangars cut off from communications or losing power entirely, it became more and more difficult for the pirate officers to understand what they needed to do or understand what was happening elsewhere.

The Mirror Raiders also stirred some trouble. They turned their weapons against the other pirate outfits in the Ulimo Militia and rapidly wiped them out at close range while their victims were completely caught off-guard!

"Ahh! What the hell?! What are you doing!?"

"Damnit, these black-and-white mechs are on the enemy's side!"

It had become clear that while the artificial anomaly had not inflicted significant harm to the core pirate forces, almost every pirate was left in the dark about this measure. Perhaps the Grand Protector himself never really thought that any opponent of the Hallowed Abyss Temple was able to overcome its ritual!

Through this backdrop of chaos and uncertainty, the Larkinson Clan vigorously crushed the disorganized pirate forces. Thousands of pirate mechs never had the chance to showcase their might after being taken out while they were still attempting to deploy into space!

Even the elite mechs of the Dry Snakes tragically missed the opportunity to make their last stand. The Penitent Sisters were grief-stricken after the anomaly caused them to lose hundreds of their mechs and sisters. They vented all of their rage at their inability to defeat the grey apparitions at the pirates!

Even if many of their mechs were running a bit low on energy and ammunition, the endurance and energy capacity of their second-class machines was not comparable to lesser products.

Against unusual threats such as the grey abominations or the avatar of the Unending One, the Penitent Sisters might not have any effective answers.

That did not mean that they were weak! When facing purely conventional products of technology, their Hexer heritage gave them a decisive edge! Not even the rare bridge mechs fielded by the pirate elites posed a significant hindrance!

"Wipe out these filth as much as possible! We must avenge our fallen sisters!"

Within just two hours, the pirates lost all of their mechs. Even so, the pacification of Ulimo Citadel had just begun.

Spanning multiple underground levels and complexes, Ulimo Citadel encompassed a lot of territory. The ordinary pirates who were in charge of managing many critical systems such as power generators, life support systems and more slowly learned that their side had lost the battle in space!

Without the crucial support of mechs and with all of their remaining fixed defenses taken out of commission, these pirates reacted in different ways.

Some despaired and collapsed in place.

A few pirates tried to offer their surrender, hoping that they might receive some mercy.

Others went crazy and tried to tamper with every important device within reach!

A lot of chaos ensued for at least an entire day. Though the Larkinsons could have sent in their mechs to pacify the situation faster, the sheer amount of destruction they unleashed would only leave the victors with nothing but ruins.

Therefore, only some Larkinsons mechs entered the various underground caverns. Their presence mainly served as a form of deterrent and backup.

Just seeing them was enough to uplift the Larkinson infantry soldiers and discourage their pirate counterparts!

Though plenty of wily pirates managed to hinder the invaders by luring them into various devious traps, in the end their final last gasp did not accomplish much. The Larkinson soldiers coordinated extensively with the defectors of the Xona Stalkers to root out and preempt many of these desperation moves.

Ulimo Citadel fell in earnest at that point.

In the meantime, the task force's fleet had closed in to retrieve the spent and exhausted Larkinson mechs. Search and rescue parties were already scouring across the debris field to retrieve the usable wrecks and see if there were any mech pilots left alive.

The various mech forces were already tallying their losses. While the Larkinson Clan performed very admirably in the previous rounds of combat, the coming of the dark sphere changed everything.

Major Verle waited for half a day after the end of the mech battle to present the numbers to Ves at his stateroom.

"How bad?" Ves asked with a grim expression.

"It's bad, sir." The older man replied. "The losses we've suffered would have broken many outfits and mech regiments. It's a testament to our discipline, cohesion and culture that our clansmen are still holding together. If not for the immense jubilation that erupted after Jannzi Larkinson's dramatic breakthrough and display of might, many of our mech pilots would have started to voice their discontent right now. As it is, achieving a bitter victory is hardly something to celebrate about."

"Will we need to worry about any protests?"

The major shook his head. "No. The propagandists under my charge are at work as we speak. While we cannot hide the truth of our substantial casualties, we can still steer the overall sentiment of our task force in a direction that is more favorable to us. Simply emphasizing our great accomplishments while downplaying all of the ugly news should be sufficient in keeping our combat troops under control. I do have to warn you that this will only tide us over in the short term. We need to act more extensively to make sure that discontent within the clan doesn't rise past a certain level."

"Tell me the numbers." Ves ordered.

"Let's begin with the Avatars of Myth. Owing due to their higher-quality mechs and superior training, the Avatars have acquitted themselves fairly well. So far, we estimate that around 150 Avatar mech pilots have died."

Ves winced at that figure. "You make it sound like it is good."

"It could have been worse, sir." Verle shrugged. "A disproportionate amount of them were either rookies or weaker-performing pilots. While it's unfortunate that so many individuals with high potential have perished, the remaining Avatars have each survived the gauntlet of the dark sphere. Not only have the survivors proven to be strong, the intense pressure of fending off the grey ghost mechs on their own has pushed them beyond their existing limits."

This was what Ves had intended from the start, though there was little for him to be happy about. While the survivors of this battle would surely emerge from this excursion stronger and more battle-tested than ever, the price the clan had paid was too bloody.

When Major Verle handed over a data pad, Ves scoured the list of names. Admittedly, he hardly knew any of these people. The Larkinson Clan adopted too many outsiders, and Ves never bothered to acquaint himself with any of them. Now that read through the list of 150 or so deaths, the anguish he felt was muted due to the abstract way that Verle presented the information.

That was probably deliberate on his part. By keeping the deaths as distant and impersonal as possible, Ves was spared from feeling too much guilt for the decisions that led the clan to this battle.

"What about the Sentinels, major?"

"As you can already guess, the Living Sentinels suffered most of all. They are not only the most numerous, but also the weakest of our mech troops. Conservatively, we are looking at 250 or so deaths, though this figure might rise. Combined with the losses the Sentinels have suffered in previous battles, less than half of the Sentinel mech pilots we have brought into the Nyxian Gap have survived. Their morale has dropped the most and it will take a lot of effort to comfort the survivors."

"Understood. Please pay close attention to them. The Sentinels were never meant to take part in proactive battles. It's a bit of an injustice to drag them along this excursion. Commander Magdalena must be pissed at me for driving so many of her men to their deaths." Ves sighed.

The major moved on to listing out the remaining losses. "The other mech forces have lost fewer mech pilots, but that is mainly due to their smaller numbers and higher combat strength. The Battle Criers have lost around 60 mech pilots, the Vandals have lost around 30 mech pilots and the Swordmaidens have lost just 4 mech pilots."

Proportionately, the Battle Criers suffered the most as they only fielded 160 mechs and mech pilots to begin with. As for the exceptional performance of the Swordmaidens, Ves wasn't surprised.

"What about the Penitent Sisters?"

"Their situation is difficult to gauge as our communications with them aren't entirely smooth. As far as we have ascertained, they have lost around 200 mech pilots. Despite their stronger mechs, they suffered substantially worse in the artificial anomaly. Our expert candidates managed to rescue many of our Larkinsons mechs in time. The same could not be said for the Hexers. An additional factor that contributed to their losses was that the anomaly actually invested most its energy in taking them down. Whatever intelligence was guiding the anomaly prioritized taking down the second-class mechs first."

That made a lot of sense. The subsequent performance of the Penitent Sisters after surviving the anomaly proved how overwhelming they could be despite being outnumbered by an order of magnitude!

All in all, while the numbers were still being adjusted, Task Force Predator lost a huge chunk of mech pilots. What was worse that the Larkinsons lost even more mechs. This left them dangerously understrength against any threats until the mech technicians rapidly managed to restore some the fallen mechs back to working condition!

Chapter 2315: Deterrence Factor

Ves deeply hoped that there weren't any strong pirate fleets traveling towards Ulimo Citadel.

It would be quite inconvenient to confront another Allidus Alliance trade convoy or something similar.

In order to obtain a better picture of the days and weeks ahead, Ves met with Calabast shortly after he ended his briefing with Major Verle.

She entered his office with an impatient expression on her face. "I'm busy with managing our takeover of Ulimo Citadel. A lot of machines and equipment needs to be locked down and we are trying to preserve as much data and valuables as possible. There are many stubborn pirate holdouts who need to be cleaned up and we are just beginning to disarm all of the boobytraps the pirates have left behind."

"This won't take long, Calabast. How is our cooperation with the pirate defectors proceeding?"

"Quite well, actually." She smirked. "The Xona Stalkers are invaluable. Without their insider access and knowledge of Ulimo Citadel, it would have taken at least five to ten times longer to pacify the pirate stronghold. If everything proceeds as expected, we will likely be able to secure every strategically-important section of the pirate base within a day. It will take a few more days to sweep the remaining areas, but the chances that someone manages to detonate a nuclear bomb or something is minimal. That said, I highly advise you not to step foot inside Ulimo until we have ruled out every potential threat."

Ves nodded. "I'm not in a hurry. Our spoils don't have anywhere they can run to. Speaking of that, have we secured any valuable gains?"

"It's too early to tell. While we have taken over many vaults and warehouses, we can only tell what goods they hold from the logs and database entries. While I believe these records are fairly accurate, there are already signs the pirates have taken away some high-value goods. In addition, there are several secret storage places that not even the Xona Stalkers know about. The Dry Snakes store some of their most valuable hauls from their mining activities in these secret vaults. It will take a lot of searching to find these secret vaults and retrieve the small but incredibly valuable high-grade exotics the pirates have mined from the local asteroid field."

All of this took time, which was something that Ves already understood. This wasn't the first pirate base the Larkinson Clan took over, but it was definitely the largest one to date. The scale of their latest conquest was incomparable, so it took a lot more work to process the aftermath of their victory.

"It looks like we will have to spend at least a week to process our gains and restore many of our damage mechs to fighting conditions." Ves concluded as he crossed his arms. "Our situation is rather precarious at the moment. Even though we can still count on our intact Larkinson and Penitent Sister mechs to guard us, the last thing I want to see is another group of pirates showing up to attack us when we are in our recovery phase."

"While I can't state with absolute certainty whether a large pirate force is on the way to retake Ulimo Citadel, so far I believe this is unlikely to happen." She stated as she began to lean against his desk. "The news has already spread. Defeating one of the entrenched powers of Maynard Fields is a major shock to everyone. The various friends and allies of the Dry Snakes will think twice before approaching us. In fact, it's more likely that they are plotting to take the pirate base for themselves. Everyone knows that our clan has no intentions of staying. Once we depart, the pirates will most likely compete against each other to take over this attractive territory."

"I see. The best way to avoid any further confrontation with other pirates is to avoid making any moves that encroach on their interests."

"It seems you get it. There is hardly any benefit to attacking us. Our remaining combat strength isn't easy to deal with despite our losses. Unless the other pirate groups are willing to commit a lot of superweapons or employ arcane rituals, their chances of winning are miserable. The gains won't outweigh their losses even if they squeeze out a victory. It makes much more sense for them to hold back and wait until we leave on our own accord. We just have to make sure that our task force isn't traveling in the direction of any of the other local pirate factions."

"Don't worry, Calabast. I have no intention of breaking open any more pirate bases." He stated, much to the spymaster's relief. "I don't think our mech pilots can tolerate much more, and so do I for that matter. We all want to end this excursion and return to civilized space."

As for his other goals such as trying to track down and rescue Solok Reyva, Ves didn't care about this mission. He would rather return empty-handed and keep the remainder of his task force than the other way around! It wasn't as if he needed to pay a large penalty for failing a mission that many other Rim Guardian associates failed to accomplish.

The woman smiled in relief after hearing that. She was genuinely afraid that Ves still didn't have his fill for excitement!

"I'm glad you think so. So far, my Black Cats are constantly monitoring the pirate movements in Maynard Fields. We have sent some hints over the galactic net that already suggests that we will soon be on our way out of the Nyxian Gap. Perhaps due to this signalling effort, the major pirate alliances haven't sent any punitive fleets to Ulimo as far as we are aware of. Even if many movements are difficult to track

throughout the Nyxian Gap, the passage of a large pirate fleet that poses a substantial threat to us can't be hidden. I will inform you if we notice any news of this nature."

There was still a chance that an enemy like the Allidus Alliance dispatched a fleet to retaliate against the Larkinson Clan despite all of this. Ves did not intend to stay long at Ulimo for this reason. The sooner they left, the better!

Their discussion moved on to the Xona Stalkers.

"So, let's talk about the defecting pirates. This is your brainchild, Calabast. Can you finally tell me what the fuss is all about and why you wanted to absorb them so eagerly?"

She smiled coyly at Ves. "Even if the Xona Stalkers have degenerated to pirates, they still possess much of the foundation of an intelligence unit. Our Black Cats need professionals like them. Do you know how hard it is to hire trustworthy spies who aren't beholden to their old states anymore? Aside from the valuable manpower that we can obtain, they also have some interesting tech, ranging from stealth technology to secure communication methods."

"That sounds interesting, but why do I feel like this isn't the extent of your gains?" Ves looked suspiciously at her. "You're usually averse to risks, but you were one of the biggest supporters of attacking Ulimo Citadel. Don't think I've forgotten about that. From what I know about you, there has to be something bigger at stake."

"You're right, Ves." Calabast sighed. "I admit that I have been acting selfish lately, but there is a good reason for that. Let me handle the current situation for a few days. Without controlling Ulimo Citadel, it's hard to say whether my objectives have been met. Wait for the good news."

Well, whatever she was aiming for, it was not as if Ves would choose another course if she didn't have ulterior motives. He would have ordered his task force to attack Ulimo Citadel regardless.

It was just that the crisis they faced and the losses they suffered exceeded everyone's expectations. No one discovered the threat of the Hallowed Abyss Temple until it was too late and the cultists already called down the dark sphere.

Ves became a lot warier towards Nyxian pirates after this battle. It was already bad enough they developed a growing penchant for arming themselves with prohibited superweapons. It was even worse when they partnered up with whacky cults that were clearly related to the Five Scrolls Compact!

"What do you think about the.. unusual phenomena we lived through?" Ves curiously asked.

"I don't claim to understand any of it." She simply replied. She narrowed her eyes at him. "I take it you know more."

"It's complicated. Suffice to say, don't underestimate any religious cult that claims to worship dark gods or eldritch horrors. While it might sound a bit ridiculous, not all of those frightening entities are fake!"

"Do gods actually exist?" She skeptically asked.

"Of course not." Ves immediately answered back. "That giant tentacled whale got beaten up by Jannzi, don't you remember? That beast is not a god. He's just a highly-evolved life form that has grown very powerful. Despite that, his powers aren't miracles. They are subject to many of the same limitations as everything else. They can be beaten as long as we have the right means."

"From what we have observed from the battle, it appears that expert candidates and expert pilots are crucial to defending against these energy-based threats. I guess we are very fortunate to have talents such as Mr. Joshua and Venerable Jannzi. We only need to look at the disproportionate losses suffered by the Penitent Sisters to know how worse off we would be without our heroes."

Venerable Jannzi Larkinson. Ves still wasn't used to regarding her with that title. After so many struggles, the Larkinson Clan finally gained its first true expert pilot. Though she was still recovering from her previous overexertion, there was no doubt to every Larkinson that the future prospects of their clan had definitely shot up due to this fantastic development!

"Not a lot of independent organizations can boast having an expert pilot in their ranks." He smirked. He had reason to feel smug! "Since we aren't bound by any states such as the Bright Republic, no one will take Venerable Jannzi away this time, even if she has attained complete resonance after completing her apotheosis."

The sight of Jannzi evoking Qilanxo's energy projection after attaining the mythical Unity of Man and Machine was unforgettable! The clan was already in the process of collecting as much footage from as many mechs and ships as possible to archive this legendary feat in the annals of the Larkinson Clan!

Calabast smiled as well. "Venerable Jannzi is a great asset to our clan. She's even more impressive than a regular expert pilot. Her dramatic feat has elevated her above many expert pilots such as Venerable Ghanso Larkinson. Her presence in our clan is actually one of the other reasons why the other pirate groups are reluctant to attack us. The mere mention of an expert pilot is enough to deter and discourage many pirates from thinking about attacking us! Just look at the Oblivion Hand and how it has aggressively swelled under the leadership of the Dark Cleaver."

She already knew that the Dark Cleaver was his father. She mentioned the Oblivion Hand on purpose, though the comparison was very apt. If Ves was a pirate commander, he would never think about getting close to any expert pilot!

Even if their actual combat power was not as fearsome as everyone thought, the insane amount of hero worship that expert pilots enjoyed elevated their stature and deterrence factor to meteoric levels!

Still, those who were clever enough such as Ves knew that Venerable Jannzi wasn't as powerful as her stellar debut performance made her out to be. Just like expert candidates, expert pilots always gained an enormous boost of strength just after they accomplished their breakthroughs.

What many people tended to overlook was that this boost was temporary!

The breakthrough process was partially like building up pressure in a container. As long as the mech pilot in question managed to create an opening, all of that pent-up pressure released all at once, producing an exaggerated effect.

Yet once the pressure was relieved, the degree of resonance strength that Jannzi could actually exert was much less impressive.

In fact, without an actual expert mech, Venerable Jannzi couldn't even properly channel her powerful new abilities!

Chapter 2316: Salted Coffee

As the newest hope of the Larkinson Clan, Venerable Jannzi attracted a lot of attention.

The clan suffered heavily during the Battle of Ulimo Citadel. Over 500 valuable Larkinson mech pilots lost their lives, and this was a heavy blow to a clan that valued kinship and family very highly.

No matter the origins of those who joined the clan, once they became a Larkinson, they quickly began to view each other as kin as well.

Losing battle companions hurt. Losing family hurt even more!

Therefore, the leaders of the clan eagerly welcomed the arrival of any good news and sources of hope.

Of all of the props the clan could use to uplift the moods of every Larkinson, the emergence of a new expert pilot was like rain in the desert.

Nothing excited mech pilots more than to enjoy the protection and company of an actual expert pilot!

The Larkinsons already had a taste of what it was like to enjoy the patronage of an expert pilot when Venerable Brutus was still around.

Unfortunately, just because he was Gloriana's brother didn't mean he was willing to become a part of the clan. As long as this was the case, it was the Wodins who enjoyed the protection of an expert pilot, not the Larkinsons!

Jannzi's breakthrough finally changed this equation. As long as she was allowed to come into power and gained a matching expert mech, she could serve as a proper deterrent against many potential enemies.

Her substantially elevated piloting skill and powerful strengths also turned her into a fantastic teacher and mentor to other mech pilots. Therefore, as long as she was willing to guide her fellow comrades, the Larkinson Clan's combat foundation would definitely rise to a higher level. This was one of the reasons why the old Larkinson Family always remained strong across many generations.

Expert pilots like Venerable Jannzi brought huge benefits to organizations such as the Larkinson Clan! At the very least, its prestige would double as long as the news started to spread.

Those in power who didn't take the Larkinson Clan seriously up to this point would definitely reconsider their opinions once they learned of Venerable Jannzi's existence!

While Ves wasn't sure whether this was enough to make everyone of importance recognize the Larkinson Clan as an independent, sovereign spaceborn clan, at the very least the Larkinsons had made a lot of progress.

The result of all of this was that Ves possessed much greater confidence in the clan's ability to roam through space. While the patronage of a single expert pilot might not be impressive to the organizations that had the capital to enter the Red Oceans, it was different closer to home.

Many private organizations simply didn't even consider messing with expert pilots! Though states weren't as deterred, their government officials were much more likely to take the Larkinson Clan seriously. As long as Ves and his clansmen didn't provoke any neutral states, there shouldn't be a reason for them to aim at the Larkinsons.

Yet for all of the amazing benefits that Venerable Jannzi brought, the burden of employing an expert pilot was not trivial.

"She needs an expert mech!"

Though Ves studied a bit about how to design an expert mech, he wasn't even close to doing so. Expert mechs were so complex and unique that designing them was pretty much a separate discipline!

On top of that, even if Ves was capable of designing such a powerful machine, how could he possibly fabricate one in the Nyxian Gap?

The limited production facilities of the Scarlet Rose and the other ships of the task force were too inadequate to produce all of the powerful high-quality parts that expert mechs demanded.

Aside from that, even if Task Force Predator plundered a lot of exotic materials from Ulimo Citadel and other pirate bases, their properties were very heterogeneous and mixed.

Expert mechs demanded at least two different types of rare and expensive materials. First, to build their strong and damage-resistant frames, Ves needed to obtain large quantities of expensive exotics.

Second, he had to get his hands on a sufficient quantity of suitable resonating exotics. Not every resonating exotic was compatible to a specific expert pilot.

Only a small proportion of resonating exotics allowed Jannzi to exert her strength to the fullest when piloting a mech, and it was extremely unlikely that Ves would find any of them in Ulimo Citadel's vaults!

"Coffee doesn't go well with salt!"

Only after returning to civilized space would Ves be able to obtain the obscure materials that Jannzi needed through the open market.

Of course, some exotics couldn't be bought so easily. Ves would have to bargain with the states or organizations that produced these rare and strategically-important materials, but that was a concern for later.

For now, Ves had no choice but to accept that he and his task force was in no condition to equip Jannzi with a proper expert mech. The most he could do was spend some time on tweaking and upgrading the Shield of Samar to account for her elevated skill.

"Such a modest upgrade will hardly do an expert pilot like her justice." Ves grimaced.

Even if the task force successfully returned to civilized space, what then? How was the Larkinson Clan supposed to supply Venerable Jannzi with a proper expert mech?

The LMC did not possess the capability to design and fabricate expert mechs. Out of every mech designer in the clan and mech company, only Gloriana participated in the design of expert mechs.

That wasn't as impressive as it sounded. She worked alongside scores of other younger mech designers to assist the efforts of the Seniors and Masters who were truly in charge.

Expecting Ves and Gloriana to design an expert mech was like expecting Ketis to design the next LMC mech.

No matter how talented she was, Ketis was still an Apprentice Mech Designer. The mechs she was capable of designing with her current knowledge base and level of experience were too immature at this point.

The issue weighed down on him so much that he figured he might as well discuss it with Gloriana.

He left his stateroom and entered the isolated chamber with the Darkbreak module.

He had already called Gloriana when the final mech battle had just ended. He still had plenty of duties to attend to at the time so he kept that discussion short.

Now that the Larkinson Clan was beginning to get a handle of everything, Ves was much less in a hurry this time. He calmly called his fiancé, who answered within seconds.

Her physical projection quickly appeared, and with it a pleasant lavender perfume. As soon as its scent wafted to his nose, he already felt some of his stress going away.

"Hello again, Gloriana." He greeted her as he hugged her soft and warm physical projection.

"Ves!" She smiled brilliantly at him as they separated. "I'm so happy for you. Our clan will surely rise to a new height with Venerable Jannzi watching over us. I haven't heard a lot of details about the battle yet. Could you tell me what exactly took place? You didn't tell me much other than that the pirates trapped you in some kind of anomaly and that Jannzi's breakthrough helped turned the tables."

He coughed. "We are still taking stock of the battle ourselves. I'll tell you more after we make sense of all of the abnormal stuff that took place. Let me tell you that getting caught in an anomaly, even if it's just a pale human-made imitation of the real thing, is not pleasant!"

"Are you okay, Ves?" She asked with genuine concern.

"It could have been worse, but we won in the end. While it's regrettable that many of our mech pilots have fallen, it's better than getting wiped out entirely."

While Ves wanted to say much more to his lover, he didn't want to expose any sensitive secrets to the MTA. As far as he was concerned, Master Willix was probably listening in on their private conversation at this very moment!

Therefore, Ves resolutely kept his mouth shut about anything related to spirituality and the Five Scrolls Compact.

That didn't mean that he could keep all of the details under wraps. Too many Larkinsons witnessed and lived through the extraordinary phenomena that accompanied the anomaly. Their mechs and ships also took plenty of battle footage. Even if the interference made everything past a certain distance a little fuzzy, there were plenty of revealing elements in the recordings!

However, just because the Larkinsons encountered a lot of weirdness didn't mean they understood any of it. For now, Ves believed that pretending to be ignorant of the truth was the way to go. It wasn't even difficult for him to do so because the rest of Task Force Predator didn't know anything either!

After explaining some less important details about the battle, their discussion soon turned to the problem of outfitting Jannzi with a new expert mech.

"To be honest, I did not expect one of your expert candidates to break through so soon." She replied as her physical projection sat down on the deck next to Ves. "Neither of us are qualified to design a true expert mech. I know more than you, but that just helps me understand how lacking we are compared to mech designers who are truly capable of designing expert mechs."

"Then what will we do? I don't want to deprive Jannzi of a proper expert mech."

"We can collaborate with a Senior or Master who is willing to take charge of such a project. With our growing fame and prestige, I'm sure that we can find at least someone who is willing enough to partner up with the Miracle Couple!"

"No!" Ves vigorously shook his head. "Expert mechs are one of the trump cards of any force. The issue of confidentiality is extremely important. Involving a third-party in the design of such a crucial mech is too risky. We need to keep the design completely in-house."

She frowned. "The Wodin Dynasty has partnered with several excellent mech designers. As long as we ask, I'm sure they are willing to help! You can trust them, Ves. They're not only Hexers, but also our allies!"

"No thank you." Ves pressed his lips into a thin line. "I know you think they are trustworthy, but I'm not willing to involve any external party."

There was no way he was going to partner up with any Hexer mech designers! Gloriana was the only one he could tolerate working with, and that was only because she was willing to accommodate his preferences.

"The expert mech doesn't have to be Venerable Jannzi's main option!" Gloriana suggested. "We just need to supply her with an expert mech so that she can begin to exert and practice her new abilities. We can just treat it as a stopgap solution that can buy time for us to come up with something better."

"Unacceptable! My earlier objections still apply. Aside from that, Venerable Jannzi is only willing to pilot the Shield of Samar unless there is no other choice. She won't pilot a better machine just because it's an expert mech. As for transforming the Shield of Samar into a stopgap expert mech, this is completely a non-starter. We need to preserve the original character and identity of Jannzi's personal mech as much as possible, and introducing a powerful Senior or Master with a different style and philosophy will ruin everything!"

Gloriana slapped his chest and let out an exasperated sigh. "Then what are we supposed to do!? I already told you that we truly can't design a proper expert mech for Venerable Jannzi at our current state! It will take years or decades before we are truly qualified to design such a powerful machine!"

"You're right." Ves admitted, though perhaps the System might be able to shorten that. "To be honest, I was thinking that we don't have to design something so complicated at the start. What if we design something more.. modest and gradually work our way up from there? Instead of designing a complete expert pilot right away, we could take an incremental approach and slowly improve the Shield of Samar step by step. What do you think?"

"Are. You. Serious?" Gloriana glared at him. "Are you trying to suggest that we should design a quasi-expert mech?!"

"What's wrong with that?!"

"It's a crippled expert mech! It's a mech that tries to be an expert mech but fails! I can't stand designing such an imperfect mech!"

Chapter 2317: The Importance of Expert Mechs

Ves felt a headache coming on because of Gloriana's obstinate stance.

Unlike previously, this time she firmly stood her ground!

"This is serious, Ves!" She angrily stated as her physical projection poked him in the chest! "I let you have your way when it came to most of the mech designs that came before. I'm aware that I'm not suited to design mass produced mechs. This is different!"

Custom mechs have to be designed according to different principles, and between you and me, I know more about personalising mech designs to individual mech pilots than you will ever achieve!"

Though she sounded incredibly arrogant when she made this claim, Ves could only lower his head in response.

The two had collaborated on enough mech design projects to become familiar with each other's strengths and weaknesses. Projects such as the Adonis Colossus design fully let him see the disparity between him and her when it came to designing and tuning a mech until it almost completely fit an individual mech pilot like a glove.

This was not a difference that could be overcome with studying and working hard. Gloriana excelled in designing custom mechs because she centered her entire design philosophy around it. By dedicating herself completely to this discipline, she gained a frightening degree of intuition and feel towards these designs.

This was something that Ves could never surpass unless he too dedicated himself entirely to designing custom mechs!

Obviously, he could never make such a decision. Ves wanted his designs to be used by as many people as possible who appreciated mechs as more than disposable tools. The Larkinson Clan also depended on his clan-exclusive mech designs such as the Bright Warrior and the upcoming Chiron to gain a competitive edge over its rivals.

He was different from Gloriana. While he adhered to his own principles, from a general standpoint, he was a bit of a generalist. He wanted to design many different kinds of mechs and refused to exclude any of them. His curiosity and yearning for new experiences constantly drove him to explore new ground.

Mech designers such as Gloriana and Ketis were different. They purposefully concentrated all of their passion into a chosen pursuit, thereby attempting to reach greater heights in their field of specialty. As a consequence, their competence in matters outside of their specialty did not progress as fast.

This must be what Master Willix meant by growing trees. Gloriana was committed to growing a tall and narrow tree while Ves was the opposite. His tree grew considerably more branches than hers, but the price for directing his growth in this fashion was that its vertical growth wasn't as impressive!

"I'll take charge of this matter." Gloriana bossily said. "I can still contact my old teachers to obtain some guidance. A project as important as this has to be done as correctly as possible right from the start. Don't talk any further about adopting an incremental approach or any of that nonsense. An expert pilot deserves better! Expert mechs not only enable them to channel their full power, but are also vital to their growth!"

"This is why I think we should provide her with a quick stopgap solution."

"You're not getting it, Ves! Expert mechs directly shape the future growth and development of their exclusive pilots. Why do you think it is so important for Seniors or ideally Masters to develop their expert mechs? It is because the better the mech designers, the better the expert mech! The better the expert mech, the faster the growth of the expert pilot in question!"

"What?! Is this true?!" Ves gasped.

"It's not as strong as you think, but it is a definite factor in the development of an expert pilot." She stated. "Masters are simply able to design expert mechs that accommodate the needs of expert pilots to a much greater extent. That is the simple truth. Therefore, if we want the best for Venerable Jannzi, it's not enough to involve a Senior Mech Designer. We need to invite an honored Master to collaborate with us! Only then will we be able to do right by her. Don't you want the best for your cousin?"

He did want that. However, he did not wish to let other mech designers take over one of his cherished designs.

The argument put forward by Gloriana put him in a very difficult bind. It wasn't easy to invite a Master Mech Designer to design an expert mech for Jannzi. Such august personalities would definitely want to take charge of the design project. With their superior methods and strong design philosophies, neither Ves nor Gloriana would have much room to contribute to the expert mech design.

At best, the pair might be able to get enough work in to qualify as contributing designers. At worst, the Master in question took care of so many aspects of the mech design that Ves and Gloriana could barely squeeze in any work, thereby relegating them to assistant designers!

This possibility was absolutely unacceptable to Ves, and Gloriana knew that. She patted him on the cheek. "Don't worry, Ves. I know how much you care about your Aurora Titan design. I'll make sure to find a Master who is amenable to some of your conditions. Just wait! With the help of a great Master, the expert mech version of the Shield of Samar will fully unleash Venerable Jannzi's potential! This is what she deserves!"

After a bit of discussion, Ves finally ended the call. He felt conflicted. Though he deeply wanted to maintain total control over the development of Jannzi's future expert mech, he simply wasn't capable enough to accept this responsibility.

There were multiple reasons why mech designers had to attain the rank of Senior before they were ready to design expert mechs. Even then, resorting to Seniors turned out to be the inferior options. For machines that were destined to become the future partners of expert pilots, it was a lot better if a Master took charge!

It was this last condition that caused Ves to be stuck in a dilemma.

On one hand, he wanted to maintain as much control as possible. As long as either Gloriana or him became the lead designer of the expert mech project, Ves was confident that they could preserve the original essence of the Shield of Samar.

On the other hand, Ves wanted the best for Venerable Jannzi. The clan also benefited if their first expert pilot received an expert mech that was just as good as the expert mechs fielded by the Friday Coalition and Hexadric Hegemony!

What mattered the most to Ves and the clan wasn't elevating her immediate battle power. Instead, the true long-term benefit they needed to prioritize is accelerating Jannzi's progression!

By pairing Venerable Jannzi up with a high-quality expert mech, she could make considerably more progress in developing and increasing the utilization of her resonance abilities. Not only that, a well-designed mech also accelerated the growth of her resonance strength.

Resonance strength was the foundation of an expert pilot! Greater resonance strength not only allowed expert pilots to perform stronger resonance abilities in battle, but also increased their endurance in battle.

Having witnessed several expert pilots in action such as Venerable O'Callahan, Ves already knew the importance of fostering their fundamental growth.

If their growth rate was fast enough, then they might have a decent opportunity to advance to ace pilot!

This was a completely different level of strength, and one that was almost exclusive to second-rate states!

"Perhaps this is why the emergence of ace pilots is almost non-existent in third-rate states." Ves hummed. "Third-class expert mechs are not only weaker than second-class mechs, but they are also designed by Seniors for the most part."

Such a gulf could not easily be overcome with talent and other endowments.

In other words, the degree of investment in an expert mech directly affected an expert pilot's growth prospects!

These realizations only made Ves feel more frustrated.

"When it comes down to it, I'm not ready yet." He sighed.

While Ves always wanted his expert candidates such as Jannzi and Joshua to undergo apotheosis as soon as possible, now that it actually happened, a part of him actually regretted this desire.

If Jannzi advanced to expert pilot a decade later or so, Ves would have been much better equipped to design a worthy expert mech for her! Even if he hadn't advanced to Senior yet at that time, he could still offer her something that was not that much worse!

"Maybe it's not a bad idea to let Gloriana take charge this time." He muttered. "She has always tolerated my design choices despite her own thoughts. Maybe it's time for me to learn how to tolerate her decisions. This is her specialty, after all. She truly knows better."

Ves knew he was being selfish when he revealed his desire to maintain his ownership over the Shield of Samar's design. Now that he reflected back on his stance, he felt as if he acted a bit too childish.

Properly speaking, mech designers existed to serve mech pilots. When Ves stubbornly put his foot down and insisted on designing a quasi-expert mech, he prioritized his own interests rather than his client's interests.

As long as the Shield of Samar did not change to the point of alienating her, Venerable Jannzi shouldn't have much of a problem getting used to a slightly different style of mech.

He remained indecisive as he exited the isolated chamber. Though he understood it was in the best interests of Venerable Jannzi to equip her with a proper, high-quality expert mech designed by a Master, he still felt unwilling to commit to such a decision.

"Maybe Gloriana can obtain something better." He muttered.

For now, he decided to wait and see how his partner dealt with this problem. She obviously wanted to advance her ideas, but Ves hoped she also took his own priorities into account.

In the meantime, Ves decided to visit the clan's first expert pilot in person. Enough time had passed for Venerable Jannzi to recover from her previous exertion.

Accompanied by Nitaa, Ves boarded a shuttle and traveled to the Redfeather. Once his shuttle docked at the light carrier, Ves stepped and greeted Commander Melkor.

"Hello, Ves." Melkor greeted him with a subdued voice. "I've been expecting your visit. Venerable Jannzi is ready to meet you in the medical bay."

They began to walk to the sick bay while they discussed the state of the Avatars.

"The Battle of Ulimo Citadel has been hard on us." Melkor remarked. "We can handle fighting regular pirates. It's the enemies we faced when we became trapped in the anomaly that is difficult for us to stomach. You can't imagine how many Avatars and other clansmen are confused by what we have lived through. What we witnessed and what we had to fight against aren't normal. None of us have ever imagined the Nyxian Gap is capable of producing such terrors."

Ves glanced at his cousin. Even if he covered most of his upper face with his new visor, Melkor's discomfort was evident in his body language.

Conventional science couldn't explain the ghost mechs and the abomination mechs. None of the scientists or engineers in the task force could wrap their heads around powerful spiritual manifestations such as the giant avatar of the Unending One.

It was completely alien to them! Only Ves and a crackpot like James were able to understand the nature of the foes the Larkinsons had fought against!

He found it a bit depressing that not even the best intellectuals in the clan were stumped by the artificial anomaly.

"I can't really explain what we have witnessed either." Ves said. "However, we don't have to understand everything we see. Enemies are enemies. We just need to beat them. There is no need to think too deep about the methods of our enemy, especially when they are so abnormal. No matter what power they possess, we just have to rely on our own strength to gain the upper hand. This applies to every battle."

Melkor mulled over his words. "I suppose you're right. I'll do my best to help the Avatars get over this battle, but it will take some time before my men get back to normal."

Chapter 2318: Great Cause

The Avatars of Myth weren't the only ones who struggled with the unexplainable enemies they fought against. The sights they had seen were beyond alien. If anything, the ghost mechs and the giant tentacled whale made them feel as if they had become stuck in a fantasy drama!

When talking to Melkor, Ves found out that ascribing all of the weirdness to the Nyxian Gap was the best way to go. This strange and perilous region already acquired a reputation for abnormal phenomena. Blaming the Gap for everything was a convenient way to handle most people's doubts.

"I'm not sure, Ves." Commander Melkor frowned. "The final enemy we've faced reminds us a lot of your glows. Is that a coincidence, or do they have something common with each other? Somehow, I don't think it's a coincidence that Venerable Jannzi's impressive energy projection just so happens to match the glow of her mech. Is that

giant lizard the true source of your glows? Is this exobeast the same kind of existence as the tentacled whale?"

Ves stopped in his tracks. He turned to his cousin with a serious expression. "I know you have questions. I know that many others are in the same boat. I can't provide you with the answers you want to hear. Some knowledge is too dangerous to spread. Knowing too much not only turns you into a security risk, but will also insert too many unnecessary thoughts in your mind."

"What are we supposed to do, then? Continue on with all these doubts lingering in our minds?!"

"Just deal with it." Ves bluntly replied. "There are many things that people like us don't understand. For example, I can tell you all about designing mechs but I don't have much of a clue about biotechnology. The same goes for mech pilots such as your Avatars. I am sure that they are good at what they do, but I don't think that any of them know how to put together a mech. That doesn't stop them from piloting mechs with incredible skill!"

The examples provided by Ves put the problems into perspective. No one was capable of knowing everything. That didn't stop society from working.

Specialization was the key to humanity's rise as a race. Starting from their caveman days, humans learned that trying to do everything was worse than dividing specific tasks to specific individuals.

By allowing some humans to become hunters, a tribe became capable of filling more bellies.

Compared to generalists, specialized professions such as lawyers, artists and accountants became capable of outputting much better work.

It didn't matter if a lawyer wasn't able to pilot a mech. He could let professional mech pilots do this job in his stead. In turn, mech pilots were always able to turn to lawyers for legal assistance.

This was how modern society worked.

Therefore, once Melkor began to view the problem from this lens, much of his unease began to clear up. "You're right, Ves. Maybe it's better if I don't think too much about this stuff. Still, it would help if we could obtain more guidance."

"Talk to James Ylvaine."

"The Living Prophet? Are you kidding? Have you converted into a believer all of a sudden?"

"I'm still a Brighter, Melkor. Don't worry about that. It's just that James is probably the best person to talk about your doubts. He.. isn't entirely delusional. Don't give me that face! Talk to him first before you rule out this option!"

Melkor clearly thought dubiously of this suggestion. Whether he followed it or not was his own business. Ves merely offered him another option.

Once they reached the sick bay, they moved to a recovery room. Several Avatar infantry soldiers in full combat gear stood guard. The importance of Venerable Jannzi was very clear to the Larkinsons. Safeguarding her life was one of the clan's highest priorities!

As Ves stepped through the hatch, he immediately felt the difference.

A faint sense of protection and warmth dominated the compartment. It was as if Ves instinctively felt he could rely on someone.

That someone happened to be Jannzi Larkinson, the first true expert pilot of the Larkinson Clan.

Right now, she was sitting on her bed while talking to Joshua, her boyfriend. Both of them turned to the newcomers.

"Patriarch. Commander." Joshua greeted.

Ves studied Jannzi for a moment. Though she looked fatigued, Ves could clearly sense the rock-solid force of will emanating from her mind.

It felt as if she was always ready to solidify her force of will into a shield whenever necessary. Every Larkinson could count on her to step up and shield them from danger.

Of course, this wasn't entirely literal. Force of will was something intangible and only capable of affecting minds. In order for Jannzi to stop physical rounds and laser beams, she needed to merge her force of will with a suitable expert mech in order to change reality.

What Ves found curious was how Jannzi's force of will differed from that of Brutus.

Both of them possessed similar convictions. Yet they had differences as well. For example, Brutus was much more selective and judgemental in whom he should fight for. As for Jannzi, Ves felt that she was willing to fight for every Larkinson without making any greater distinctions.

Venerable Brutus clearly developed a protective force of will, yet he opted to specialize in piloting rifleman mechs. To him, his best way to protect his loved ones such as Gloriana was to destroy her enemies!

As for Venerable Jannzi, Ves had the impression that she was more inclined to adopt a more supportive role. That didn't mean she eschewed attacking her opponents. After all, Qilanxo proactively attacked the Unending One at the end of the previous battle.

"Ves." She finally spoke after staring at him for a time.

Her eyes conveyed much greater depth than before. This was something that Ves had seen in many expert pilots. It was as if they were much more capable of seeing the truth of matters.

Part of this was because of the force of will they developed. This empowered will was no longer locked within their minds, but could spread around them like glows. This force of will was able to inspect anyone who came within its range.

Even now, Ves felt her force of will brushing against his mind, allowing Jannzi to subconsciously judge him by his spirit rather than his outward facade.

Ves tried his best to ignore the uncomfortable subliminal inspection. No one liked to expose their true selves to people.

"I am glad to see you are awake and unharmed. I hope you'll recover as quickly as possible. Our clan is still in the inner periphery of the Nyxian Gap. With all of the losses we suffered, we need you to inspire our remaining mech pilots."

Jannzi frowned a bit. "Do you intend to stay in the Nyxian Gap?"

"Oh, no! Not at all!" Ves raised his palms. "Once we are done here at Ulimo Citadel, I immediately intend our task force to leave the Gap. We have met most of the objectives after this battle. Our clan has already paid a heavy price and we truly can't afford any further losses."

Both Jannzi and Joshua looked relieved after hearing that. Just like many other clansmen, the pair no longer looked forward to any further adventures in the Nyxian Gap. If they had to face something like a dark god again, the task force would probably be wiped out to the last man.

Ves began to sit on a chair next to the bed and asked some basic questions. He checked to see if there was anything amiss with her physical, mental and spiritual state.

Though he couldn't say much about her physical state, spiritually she was already stronger and more vigorous than ever. Though she couldn't match the intensity of stronger and more established expert pilots such as Venerable Brutus, Ves knew that she had a lot of room for growth.

She flicked her eyes at Melkor, Nitaa and Joshua. "Could you leave for a moment? I need to discuss something with Ves in private."

Ves had an inkling of what she wanted to talk about. "Joshua, Melkor, you go ahead. Nitaa can stay. She can be trusted."

The two male Larkinsons suppressed their curiosity and reluctantly left the recovery room. Even if they wanted to stay, the will of an expert pilot had to be respected.

Rank didn't always matter. While Melkor technically commanded the Avatars, of which Jannzi was a part of, the Larkinsons always revered expert pilots from their own midst.

They weren't unique in this. The Mech Corps was very similar.

Ves couldn't ignore Jannzi's status either. Even though he stood equal to her as a Journeyman, the greater honor and renown of expert pilots meant that they always enjoyed a much better reception.

"I spoke to Qilanxo." Jannzi began. "Though we haven't talked for long, I learned some of the truth of who she is and where she came from. I.. I never imagined my Shield of Samar and every other Aurora Titan mech is being watched by a giant lizard who transcended death."

"..."

Well, this was awkward. It turns out that Qilanxo wasn't shy in letting Jannzi get to know her better.

This shouldn't have come as a surprise. Qilanxo invested considerably in Jannzi's development. At this stage in their relationship, Jannzi deserved to know who supported her whenever she piloted her personal mech.

Ves activated his signal jammer.

"Well, since you know this much, I might as well stop holding back. Qilanxo isn't human. Despite this, she is a friend and ally to us. She is even a part of the clan." He stated and stretched his hand to Nitaa. His bodyguard handed him the Larkinson Mandate. "During the founding of our clan, she was with us and invested a part of her essence in this book."

After opening the large and heavy book, he rapidly flipped the pages until he reached the third-to-last page. He then transferred the tome over to Jannzi.

She could feel the familiar spiritual signature in the page. This reassured her for some reason.

Nyaaaa?

Goldie looked curiously at Jannzi and began to nuzzle her cheek against the hand holding the book.

Due to her increased spiritual sensitivity, she actually felt the warmth and love emanating from the ancestral spirit!

Jannzi's eyes grew fuzzy as pleasant thoughts and emotions popped in her mind. Her will to defend the Larkinson Clan resonated with her current feelings.

A sense of peace and acceptance flowed from her body. She carefully closed the Larkinson Mandate and handed it back to Ves, who passed it on to his bodyguard.

"Thank you for letting me touch your book. It was.. an enlightening experience." She softly said. "I can understand why you don't talk about this. Don't worry. I won't tell anyone about Qilanxo and where your glows come from. Just make sure to lead the Larkinson Clan better."

"The battle we fought is painful, but our clan has never shied away from taking sacrifices." He said. He couldn't very well tell her that he made a mistake! "Our clan will grow stronger because of this battle. Larkinsons died, but their sacrifices are not in vain. We will recover and become greater after we return. As long as we are stronger, we are much more capable of surviving the challenges to come."

Jannzi frowned a bit. "You constantly talk about growing stronger, but are we getting happier because of it? How many clansmen have lost their families? How many Larkinsons have lost their fathers, mothers, brothers or sisters? How many of us have lost our lifelong friends and comrades?"

"This is the greater hardship that our clan must learn to endure." Ves glibly replied. "It was no different when we used to be part of the old Larkinson Family. Many of our mech pilots fought against the Vesians, and not everyone makes it out alive. Despite that, our family kept sending our mech pilots to the Mech Corps, because we knew that we were fighting for a greater cause."

"Are we fighting for a greater cause or are we fighting to advance your personal ambitions?"

Ves pressed his lips.

Chapter 2319: Conflicting Principles

Talking to expert pilots always made Ves feel uncomfortable.

They were uncommonly perceptive and difficult to fool. They were very stubborn about their convictions and never budged their principles.

This was the source of their strength. Their strong will and unflinching beliefs was not normal and the reason why they distinguished themselves from mortals.

Regular humans possessed complex thoughts and personalities. It wasn't strange for normal people to be hypocritical or hold contradictory thoughts. It was this very flexibility and malleability that made them humans.

Expert pilots were different. They came across as stiff, rigid and stubborn. The disposition of expert pilots towards other people depended on how well the latter aligned with the former.

It was that simple, and that was why expert pilots were so trouble.

In a real society, plenty of people who hated or disliked each other got along cordially. Typical relations between teachers and students, bosses and subordinates, partner to partner and more often worked more often than not even if the people involved would rather want to stab each other in the back.

This was because humans were more flexible than many credited them. Some would say that people detestable for holding duplicitous or deceptive thoughts.

Ves just thought that this kind of behavior was essential to allow human society to function.

Just talking to someone as principled and rigid as Venerable Jannzi reinforced this notion. She didn't like him very much, and she had no problem expressing her true feelings.

"While you are the reason the Larkinson Clan came into existence, I haven't forgotten that it came as a result of a drama that broke our old family." She stated to Ves. "Even if you aren't entirely responsible, you are still the primary reason why the Larkinson Family split apart."

"What are you trying to say, Jannzi?" He frowned.

Just because she was an expert pilot didn't mean he had to take her hits. He had his own principles! Besides, unlike many other people, Ves already got rid of most of his instinctive urge to worship expert pilots.

She looked at him with suspicion. "You're a troublemaker, Ves. You're a rulebreaker. I suppose that is good when it comes to your job. I can see why you have been so successful in your career. It's just that I don't want you to pass on your recklessness to the clan. You are in charge of the lives of tens of thousands of Larkinsons. It's one thing for them to make a choice that they'll eventually regret. It's another thing if they are forced to suffer because you have been driving them to take a lot of risks."

Her concern for the Larkinson Clan was evident. Her will centered around protecting her fellow Larkinsons, and this trait compelled her to voice her opinions to Ves. Patriarch or not, Jannzi cared too much for her fellow comrades to remain silent!

"I don't claim to be perfect, or make the right choices." Ves replied. He felt increasingly more tired at fending off her accusations. "The nature of taking risks means that sometimes my plans blow up. Certainly, I never expected to encounter so much opposition when attacking Ulmo Citadel. That is my responsibility. However, I can't promise I won't make decisions like this again, because we can't coast along if we want to survive and thrive."

He didn't make any excuses and just went on to justify his decisions according to his own thoughts. He believed this was the best way to deal with expert pilots. Even if she disagreed with him, as long as he stood his ground, she couldn't do all that much.

"You're the leader, Ves. Since my clansmen still see fit to keep you in charge, I won't stand in your way." She eventually spoke. "That doesn't mean I'm on your side. I fight on behalf of every Larkinson, not just you. I hope you will never do something one day that will force me to oppose you. Have I made myself clear?"

Ves nodded. "I will try my best to avoid these situations. Just take into account that politics is very murky and that many decisions can be good and bad depending on your perspective. You may think of me as a latent danger to our clansmen, but as far as I'm concerned I have never done something that won't better the clan in some way."

Their discussion on this matter came to an end. Venerable Jannzi made her stance known and has not shied away from giving him a warning.

If an ordinary Larkinson talked like this, Ves would have smacked the presumptuous individual in the face.

However, an expert pilot's weight was incomparable to a random person. Ves had no choice but to tolerate her conditions. No matter what kind of demands she issues, Ves was more than willing to abide by them as long as the Larkinson Clan gained her patronage.

The protection of a genuine expert pilot brought immense advantages to Ves and his Clan! It was due to this that Jannzi gained a much greater say in matters than before.

This was the benefit of strength!

After discussing some other minor issues, the conversation eventually veered towards her future expert mech.

"Right now, Gloriana and I aren't sure how to provide you with a good expert mech."

"Just convert the Shield of Samar to an expert mech."

Ves ruefully smiled at her. "It's not that simple. The technical challenges of designing an expert mech are very steep. If we make any missteps, you will suffer greatly due to your high dependence on such a machine. While I too want to elevate the Shield of Samar to a height that corresponds to your newfound strength, it's very difficult to do so on our own. Right now, we are exploring various options. I can't rule out the possibility that we'll be inviting a guest designer who will take charge of redesigning your Shield of Samar. If that happens, you should expect significant changes to the mech."

Jannzi silently stared at Ves for a few seconds. "While I don't think you're the best leader of our clan, I trust you when it comes to designing mechs. I know that expert mechs always differ from regular mechs. It's fine if my upgraded Shield of Samar is a little different from before. Just make sure that the mech still recognizes me at the end."

"I will make sure to take this into account."

He was pleasantly surprised by her tolerance. If she insisted on keeping the entire form and functionality of the Shield of Samar, then it would have been much more difficult to involve an external mech designer!

"When can I expect an improved machine?" She asked.

"It will take time. Please be patient. We are not like the Mech Corps who can partner up with many Seniors who are eager to design the highest-performing mechs in their careers. I estimate it will take at least a year if we insist on designing something as soon as possible."

That was a long time for an expert pilot to spend without a corresponding expert mech. This was a bit of a pity, since Jannzi had just broken through. This should be the best time for her to experience rapid growth. Time was precious for her as well.

Still, designing something as important as an expert mechs really couldn't be rushed. Ves had partially come around to Gloriana's opinions.

During the conversation, he also reminded himself of the need to take the wishes of the mech pilots into account. Her input was vital in shaping her future expert mech.

"If you have a choice on how your future expert mech would be, what do you want to change or add?" He asked.

"I don't mind it if my mech is slow." She said. "I have learned to accept this limitation. In my mind, it shouldn't be much of a difference if you turn it into a heavy space knight. The greatest strength of the Aurora Titan model is how it never compromises on defense. I want that to be the same for my expert mech."

Ves nodded in understanding. "We'll have to replace the polarizing module with a proper mech-grade shield generator. The former simply can't keep up with the elevated performance of your mech. I might also add additional defensive modules to your mech. The budget for expert mechs allows us to incorporate vastly more powerful but also significantly more compact mech parts into your expert mech. This frees up a lot of room for additional weapons and features. As long as you want, we can upgrade the mobility of your mech with all of the extra capacity."

She shook her head. "I understand the appeal of it, but that's not how the Shield of Samar and Aurora Titan is meant to fight. Just put everything in defense."

"That.. is not entirely appropriate. If you don't want to increase the mobility of your mech, then it should at least be more threatening. Otherwise, what makes your mech different from deployable walls? You can't just take hits all the time. Sometimes, defending the clan is best accomplished by fighting back. This is especially the case for hostile expert mechs. Instead of trying to crack your resilient mech, they can easily bypass you and slaughter our vulnerable ships."

"That.. does sound bad." She admitted.

There was plenty of time to develop a new vision for her expert mech. Ves wasn't in a hurry to offer alternatives.

"Your expert mech will be a second-class one." He added. "While it's significantly cheaper and more practical to design a third-class mech, the enemies we face in the present and future are already greater. We need to keep up, and only a second-class expert mech will ensure you will remain relevant."

"I look forward to piloting such a powerful machine. The Shield of Samar truly deserves better."

Though the quality and performance of second-class expert mechs varied a lot, the best of them could be just as powerful if not more than a first-class multipurpose mech!

Of course, Ves simply couldn't afford to spend that much in his current state. The expert mech for Jannzi would likely be substantially weaker than a first-class multipurpose mech, and that was fine. They could always upgrade her expert mech later.

They two eventually ended their personal discussion. Ves deactivated his signal jammer while Melkor and Joshua reentered the compartment.

"Did the two of you have a good talk?" Melkor curiously asked.

"We came to an accord." Ves curtly replied. "Venerable Jannzi agreed to act as the shield of the Larkinson Clan. The only snag is that she will have to wait to receive her

expert mech. We can't design and build it on our own. Don't expect her to throw up barriers that can block nukes."

"That's.. regrettable. I hope you don't take too long."

"How will you assign Jannzi, sir?" Joshua asked. "Will she remain with the Avatars or will she be transferred to a new unit?"

That was an interesting question. Ves and Commander Melkor looked at each other.

Strictly speaking, there were pros and cons to both options.

Ves made a quick decision. "For now, I think it is best to keep her in the Avatars. This might change in the future depending on the development of our clan. I'll discuss this with Major Verle."

Jannzi was just the first expert pilot of the clan. In the future, Ves hoped to welcome additional expert pilots such as Joshua, Commander Dise and Commander Orfan.

Though Ves had a lot of guesses about what it took for expert candidates to advance, witnessing Jannzi's breakthrough when it happened gave him a lot of clues.

He felt much more confident in his theories now that he found some supporting evidence. Perhaps he could find ways to induce the remaining expert candidates in the clan to advance without throwing them in a life-or-death battle!

Chapter 2320: Plucking Strings

Ulimo Citadel. After several days of pacification and sweeping, the Larkinsons managed to tame the previously-wild pirate fortification.

Ves along with his students and his assistant mech designers stepped into the empty and damaged public marketplace section of the base.

The entire place had lost all of its liveliness. The previous catastrophe wiped out the vast majority of civilian Nyxians. The grey ghosts the anomaly spawned ruthlessly hunted every form of life without caring whether they were Larkinsons, pirates or innocent bystanders.

Speaking of the assistant mech designers, Ves had treated them rather unfairly in the Battle of Ulimo Citadel. When the artificial anomaly came into being, Ves eventually decided to go inside to rescue some of his trapped mech pilots.

He overlooked the fact that his Braves resided on the Scarlet Rose as well.

Entering the abyss and witnessing the hard struggle against the ghost mechs and abomination mechs frightened all of them. Witnessing the giant avatar of the Unending One barreling down on the Scarlet Rose in order to swallow the ship whole was far more terrifying than being subjected to the Doom Guard's glow!

Fortunately, the trauma they endured had lessened because of the rise of Jannzi Larkinson. The clan's first expert pilot not only blocked the tentacled whale's offensive, but also beat the horrifying creature with a magnificent and inspiring energy projection of Qilanxo!

The impact of the latter was extremely crucial in restoring everyone's hope. The Battle of Ulimo Citadel revealed that there were monsters in the Nyxian Gap. Yet no matter how formidable they appeared, these evil creatures would never be able to topple Task Force Predator as long as Venerable Jannzi was their shield!

None of his Braves broke down in the end. Many of them possessed a high tolerance for stress to begin with, and the remainder tried their best to pretend they were fine if only because they didn't let Ves down.

"It's so cruel." Maikel spoke with a hollow voice. "I know they're all pirates, but.. these folk didn't do too many awful things in their lives. They were just born in the wrong place at the wrong place."

"They are pirates. They are our enemies." Catherine Evenson spoke. As a former noble from the Sentinel Kingdom, she was never soft when it came to the pirates of the Nyxian Gap. "It's all well and good to feel pity on the ordinary people who live in places like these, but everything they do facilitates the activities of pirates. Without their existence, it would have been a lot harder for pirates to repair their ships, build new mechs, feed their people and process their ill-gotten gains."

"That doesn't mean they are guilty!"

The squabble erupting from his assistants heated up. Everyone had a different view on the guilt of the non-pirate natives of the Nyxian Gap. Some took a harder line and wanted to give them the same treatment as actual pirates. Others sympathized with these 'innocents' and wanted to let them off. Most remained indecisive.

"What do you think, teacher?" Zanthar asked.

The assistants all fell silent as they became curious at what Ves had to say about this issue. How would he solve this dilemma?

Ves turned around and smiled at them. He looked particularly dashing today due to the cape he wore over his patriarch uniform.

"Before I give you my answer, let me remind you who we are. We are the Larkinson Clan. We are the offshoot and continuation of an honorable military family. Though we have decided to chart our own course, we still hold true to many of our original values. As an upright organization, we must act according to the prevailing laws."

Rina Orion raised her hand. "Sir, this is the Nyxian Gap. There aren't any laws. Didn't we steal a lot of pirate superweapons and used them against their former owners in the previous battle? Clearly the rules don't apply here!"

"Not quite so." Ves shook his head. "The Big Two's mandate doesn't merely extend to all of the territories that fall under civilized space. It also governs our behavior outside of it. If our clan randomly employed nuclear missiles and warship-grade laser cannons in the Nyxian Gap, the MTA would have arrested us as soon as we returned to civilized space. I had to obtain a special exemption to allow our clan to use those taboo weapons without repercussions."

That sounded rather unfair, but the Big Two didn't really care about that. They just wanted to minimize the use and proliferation of these weapons as much as possible.

"It is in our clan's best interests to remain on the good side of the Big Two. We don't want to become outlaws and separate ourselves from human society. Trying to remain aloof from human states doesn't mean we intend to reject our humanity."

Every assistant nodded.

"Aside from that, our behavior should match our ideals. Even if the Big Two's laws aren't hanging over our head, we should still treat the average residents of the Nyxian Gap with dignity. We aren't killers. We aren't pirates. More importantly, we aren't responsible for enforcing law and order inside and outside the Nyxian Gap. Even if these residents go on to join a pirate gang or something, that's not under our purview. All these what ifs and future threats are immaterial to us. We should just act according to our prevailing policies and principles."

The Braves all looked thoughtful at his answer. It partially sounded like a copout, but Ves didn't care. He just wanted to prevent the Larkinson Clan from degenerating into immorality.

After all, what sounded better, leading a clan of cruel and bloodthirsty butchers or leading a clan of noble and honorable warriors?

As Ves observed the Larkinson mechs and infantry soldiers standing guard and searching through the structures, he nodded in satisfaction.

He was pleased with the professionalism displayed by his troops. The Larkinson Clan may consist of many outsiders who came from many different states, but the Larkinsons had successfully molded them into disciplined soldiers.

Even if discipline in the ranks wasn't as strict as in the Mech Corps, they didn't slack off or abused their privileges.

As the tour continued, they entered a large holding facility where the Larkinsons stowed away a lot of average residents, at least what was left of them. According to latest estimates, the ritual devoured at least eighty percent of the total population of Ulimo Citadel.

That was a lot of people!

The few who clung to their lives had reason to escape the calamity that befell the rest.

A portion of them were lucky enough to enjoy the protection of the authorities when the darkness spewed out ghosts.

Some were relatives of the Dry Snakes or other important pirate outfits.

Others managed to fend off the ghosts on their own with their personal weapons.

Regardless, the Larkinsons preliminarily deemed these captives to be fairly free of guilt.

As Ves and his group of Braves approached the block of holding cells, the barriers turned transparent, allowing both sides to get a good look at each other.

Some Nyxian residents looked hollow. Others had curled up and cried. A few went berserk and banged against the energy screen that kept them captive.

"YOU FILTHY CIVILIZED FOLK! YOU KILLED MY JOHNNY!"

"Why did you Larkinsons attack our home?! We never did anything wrong! Now look what you've done! Our lives are ruined!"

"You there! You with the cape! Are you the big boss? Come over here so I can kick you between the legs! You deserve it for wiping out all of my comrades!"

The jeers, threats and insults impacted the Braves quite a bit. For all of their courage, they were still too young and tender to endure public indignation at such a close and personal level.

Ves remained impassive as he observed both the captives and his assistants.

Many of the latter weren't taking the insults well. Only a small number of socially-adept people such as Catherine Evenson managed to brush off the death threats and other pejorative remarks.

The rest didn't really know how to deal with this situation. Should these prisoners be killed? Should they be punished? Or were these captives all justified in voicing out the cruel and destructive consequences of the Larkinson Clan's decision to attack Ulimo?

"Why do you look confused?" Ves asked his assistants. "There is no reason for you to feel sorry for these people. We have our reasons for conquering Ulimo Citadel. This won't be the last time we take offensive action. As is the case in every battle that takes place where people live, collateral damage is inevitable. This time, the pirates are the primary culprits responsible for killing off their own people. These unfortunate people are blaming the wrong side."

"Aren't we at least partially responsible, sir?" Moltar Ringer asked. "I mean, it is true that these people wouldn't have lost their friends and family if our task force chose to bypass Ulimo Citadel."

Ves shook his head. "Ulimo Citadel is a critically important pirate base. It not only facilitates the running of a lot of smaller pirate outfits, but also sells crucial exotics to an even greater and more threatening pirate alliance. Taking it out of commission, if at least temporarily, is a great service to the Sentinel Kingdom and other states that suffer from frequent pirate raids."

"Are we supposed to endure their insults, then? They are saying really awful stuff."

"Of course not." Ves grinned. "While we should do our best to act in an honorable fashion, that doesn't mean we are white knights. If these scum are stupid enough to provoke us, then feel free to give them the punishment they deserve."

He pulled out a laser pistol from his holster and fired at the nearest Nyxian resident who was hurling insults in his direction.

"I WILL HUNT YOU DOWN TO THE ENDS OF THE GALAXY! I WILL REPAY YOU A THOUSAND TIMES OVER FOR KILLING MY SONS! I WON'T REST UNTIL—"

A bright laser beam passed through the energy screen and blasted the woman's head apart.

Many other captives stopped yelling at the Larkinsons. They all backed off and shook in fear as their boldness had left them. None of them thought that their captors would kill one of their own on the spot!

The Braves all looked astonished at this turn of events. Seeing Ves kill someone without hesitation did not conform with the image of a talented and capable Journeyman Mech Designer!

"This is the true nature of Nyxian people." Ves stated to his Braves. "Don't pity them. Certainly, many of them had not been dealt a fair hand in life, but that is no reason for

our Larkinson Clan to be soft on them. As Larkinsons, we should first look to ourselves. In the future, all of us will definitely encounter more situations where furthering the interests of our clan means harming the interests of other people. Make the right choice."

He wasn't just speaking to his Braves. What he said would doubtlessly spread to the rest of the rest of the Larkinson Clan. As a newly-founded organization, much of its customs were still in flux. The influence of leaders such as Ves on the overall culture of the clan was very significant.

This was why Ves purposefully held this demonstration. He wanted to instill some honorable but also practical norms onto his clansmen through vivid acts like these.

Compared to writing a dry and boring essay and forcing every Larkinson to read it, Ves believed it was much better to go out and illustrate his point in a more direct fashion.

Though he felt like a greasy politician for doing so, there was a reason that many of them eagerly employed this method. Theatrics worked! As Ves had already witnessed many times during his mech design presentations, people were much more driven by their emotions than their logic.

As long as Ves mastered the art of tugging the strings of their emotions, he could do whatever he wanted!